

LINEAR OR NUCLEAR?
FAMILY PATTERNS IN SOME MIDDLE ENGLISH POPULAR ROMANCES

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It is a literary commonplace that happy marriages and happy families do not make for very interesting stories, but it is equally a commonplace that certain forms of narrative must end with the establishment of both.¹ This is the case with the Middle English popular romances. Though not all of these narratives are primarily about families, scholars recognize a large group of them, frequently called family romances, which recount the disruption and reestablishment of a noble family.² Typically these families are disrupted not by external factors, but by internal conflicts arising from quintessentially familial activities: marriage and the birth of children. Wives and husbands, parents and children are separated to be reunited only when the children have independently proven themselves and are ready to have families of their own. In the romances I will be examining, these conflicts arise from the imperatives of two different but interrelated family structures: the linear and the nuclear.³ The linear family, constituted by bloodline, is male centered and public, its members bound by ties of inherited property and authority. The nuclear family, constituted by marriage, is more female oriented and private, its members bound by ties of nurture. Some family romances include only parents and children, but a number of them—*Emaré*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Octavian*, *Sir Degaré*, and *Sir Torrent of Portengale*—encompass three generations.⁴ These multi-generational narratives most clearly delineate the two family structures and depict their conflicts.

Many Middle English romances are characterized by a double narrative structure of separation-reunion and love-marriage where neither plot can be resolved without the other. Susan Wittig has argued that, on the level of deep structure, this double plot resolves problems arising from conflicting matrilinear and patrilinear patterns of familial relationships. When combined with the motif of the male Cinderella, as is common in the family romances, the double plot also addresses conflicts between the restrictive medieval class system based on lineage

and inherited entitlement and the upward social mobility sought by members of the gentry and bourgeoisie (Wittig 185, 89). Additionally, I suggest, in those romances where the plot unfolds over three generations, the double structure allows for exploration of the sometimes conflicting agendas of linear and nuclear families.

Before turning to the romances themselves, we need to consider the factors contributing to the prominence of family romances in the later Middle Ages: changes in family and social organization, and the social functions of romance as a genre. Family and social status were synonymous for the feudal elite of the High Middle Ages. The aristocratic family, constructed as a lineage of males stretching backward and forward in time, became a mechanism for preserving and consolidating the patrimony in the form of wealth, status, and the exercise of power. Families were increasingly caught up in dynastic processes such as primogeniture, arranged marriages, and limitations on the inheritance of widows, which concentrated power in the hands of the older male members.⁵ Joel Rosenthal's study of late medieval English wills reveals that knowledge of one's family background was an important component of culture and socialization for the upper classes, and for those further down the social hierarchy as well. Particularly relevant to the romances I'm considering here is his observation that the wills show a concern for preservation of descent "into the next-plus-one generation. When the children's children were on the scene, then (and perhaps only then . . .) was patriarchy fully valorized" (227). At the same time, the ascendance of the nuclear family unit composed of parents and children has been traced in the later Middle Ages, though social historians do not agree on the medieval origins of this trend. The practice of companionate marriage, a union based on mutual attraction and personal choice, is bound up with the rise of the nuclear family.⁶ While arranged marriages were the norm for the aristocracy, individuals of lesser status had greater autonomy in choosing their spouses. By the fifteenth century in England some accommodation to mutual attraction appears to have been the expectation even among the gentry, though it is also clear that parents continued to arrange the marriages of their children, especially daughters.⁷ Lawrence Stone finds nuclear families assuming greater prominence in early sixteenth-century England, and traces the development of less patriarchal, closed, domestic families based on the autonomy of the couple in the early seventeenth century (7).

Romance as a genre has always concerned itself with matters of social class and marriage. It originated in the aristocratic courts of twelfth-century France, and scholars have found in the classic romance plot a response to the social and familial stresses generated by feudal primogeniture.⁸ In these narratives, an unmarried knight wins property and a noble wife through chivalric combat and so establishes himself as his own lord and head of a family. Stephen Knight, writing of the Middle English romances, calls this the "hero alone" pattern and explains how it justifies the appropriation of wealth and power by the feudal aristocracy and "euphemizes themes of social *arrivisme*" (103). In the later fourteenth century, particularly in England, romances recounting the dissolution and reunion of a family became popular.⁹ Knight finds that the family romances uphold a wider range of values than the hero alone narratives and give greater scope to female characters whose courage and constancy (though passive) may be nearly as efficacious in establishing the family's entitlement as the combats of its male members (111). The proliferation of family romances coincides with the beginnings of the changes in marriage practices and family structures. In fact, Felicity Riddy makes the case that many romance plots are "derived from the crises and hiatuses of the nuclear family and the lineage" (235), though she has not investigated the family romances which lend themselves so readily to such an assertion.

Since these narratives depict threats to the family that are internal, not external as in the hero alone romances, the family romances have lent themselves to psychological analyses based on Freudian theories of family romance and childhood development. Lee Ramsey and Derek Brewer read them as maturation stories depicting the children's desire to escape from the parental family, find suitable mates outside the family, and establish themselves as adults in their own right with families of their own. Themes of incest and abandonment, control of sexuality and establishment of identity are common in these narratives, as they are in the folktales the romances often resemble.

The general psychological processes presented in the romances take on specific significances when viewed in their medieval context. Concerns about incest may have been heightened by the Church's proscription of marriage within seven, later four, degrees of kinship.¹⁰ John Boswell, in his historical study of child abandonment, points out medieval authors' preoccupation with incest in such circumstances

(373), and notes that romances accurately depict contemporary methods and motives for child abandonment.¹¹ Throughout the Middle Ages intact families sent children, especially sons, to be raised in the households of others.¹² According to David Salter, the Oedipal themes of some romances embody "medieval concerns with definition of a son's rights in relation to those of the father in patriarchal society," while the traditional theme of separation from the mother also serves the patriarchal feudal ethos (50). Family structures favoring males over females and firstborn above other siblings gave rise to conflicts between fathers who sought to maintain their status and grown sons who sought to enjoy the wealth and exercise the power that were their birthrights. Families were also prone to conflicts among siblings who shared equally in the lineage but could not enjoy the status of their fathers and older brothers without weakening the family's hegemony through division. Concerns about family would have only have been heightened by the recurrences of the Black Death, which left many a family decimated in its wake. Lineages died out, children were orphaned, adoptive families replaced biological ones, and surviving members established new families, often leaving their ancestral places of residence. No doubt these circumstances contributed to the changes in family organization noted above.

The family romances' proliferation coincided with the emergence not only of new patterns of family organization, but also of certain classes: the increasingly powerful and wealthy gentry and bourgeoisie. It was among these classes that the ascendance of the nuclear family was most apparent (Stone 652), and as they assumed prominence they formed a new, non-courtly audience for literature. From the second quarter of the fourteenth century onward, the quantity of literary works in English increased dramatically, and notable in this increased production is the number of popular romances. The manuscripts in which the romances survive often belonged to members of the gentry and bourgeoisie and served, no doubt, to assert their status in imitation of aristocratic literary patrons. There is some evidence that the volumes were associated with individual families and passed down from generation to generation.¹³ The contents of the manuscripts indicate their owners' concern for domestic matters. Besides the occasional recipes and medical items, which attest to the household uses of the volumes, they contain articles on manners, religious devotion, and other topics appropriate to both the education of children and the

guidance of socially aspiring adults. Some of the romances themselves may have been intended for the instruction of youth.¹⁴ Romances were frequently grouped together in these household compendiums and in proximity to other materials in such a way as to suggest that the compilers saw parallels in content or theme.¹⁵ Obviously their stories struck a note that resonated with their audiences, since the romances continued to be recopied in manuscripts and issued in printed texts into the seventeenth century.

The intensity of the social pressures and psychological anxieties that lay behind the three-generation family romances that concern us here can be easily seen in a review of their plots, which consist of combinations of calumniated queen and male Cinderella stories. In the remainder of this paper, I will analyze the narratives in terms of formulaic episodes of separation, displacement of the nuclear family, and reunion. *Sir Eglamour of Artois* and *Sir Torrent of Portengale*, whose plots are nearly identical, tell of heiresses (Christabelle and Desonell respectively) who are courted by worthy knights of lesser status (Eglamour and Torrent). The ladies' fathers (the Earl of Artois and the King of Portugal) appear to accept their daughters' choices of suitors and propose series of combats to test the young men, but before the final challenges are undertaken, the couples consummate their unions and the ladies become pregnant. When the children are born, the fathers set their daughters and grandsons adrift. The mothers and sons survive the perils of the sea only to be washed ashore and separated, but they eventually find refuge with noble families. Meanwhile, Eglamour and Torrent return to claim their brides only to find them exiled. The knights take action against the fathers, secure the realms, and set out to find their ladies. In both romances the ladies' guardians declare tournaments for them. Christabelle's son Degrebelle, now grown, wins his mother's hand in the contest though his identity is discovered and incest avoided. He becomes her champion but is later defeated by his father, whom Christabelle then recognizes by his shield. Torrent and his twin sons, unknown to each other, joust for Desonell and Torrent is deemed the champion. At this point Desonell recognizes her lover and the sons' identities are discovered as well. Once the families are reunited, they return to claim their patrimonies and the romances conclude with celebrations of the couples' marriages.

In *Sir Degaré* the woman is not cast out, but abandons her child to avoid suspicion. The sole daughter of a widowed king who will allow her to marry only the person who can defeat him in combat, the princess is raped by a fairy knight and becomes pregnant. After her son is born, she has him delivered to a hermit along with tokens of identification. The child, Degaré (the only named character in the romance), reaches maturity and sets out to find his parents. He rescues a lady from an unwelcome suitor, and then defeats his grandfather to win his mother's hand before their true relationship is discovered. He next sets out to find his father and encounters him in a forest where they fight to a draw before recognizing each other. Finally, Degaré brings his father to his mother and the couple is married with her father's consent.

Like Christabelle and Desonell, the heroine of *Emaré* is set adrift by her father, but she also suffers at the hands of a cruel mother-in-law. As the story begins, Emaré's widowed father is overcome by her beauty and determines to marry her. When she refuses, he has her put out to sea, and, after much suffering, she washes ashore in Galys where she is taken in by the king's steward, Sir Kaydor. She does not reveal her royal status, but the king falls in love with her and marries her in spite of his mother's objections. When Emaré gives birth to a son, Segremore, in her husband's absence, her mother-in-law substitutes letters telling the king his wife has given birth to pups and later replaces his response with orders to set mother and child adrift. This time they wash ashore at Rome; after seven years, the King of Galys and then her father arrive in the city to do penance for their treatment of Emaré. She sends Segremore to bring the men to her, and reveals her identity to reunite the family.

Octavian too features a cruel mother-in-law. As the romance begins, Florence, wife of the Emperor Octavian, gives birth to twin sons, Octavian and Florent. But her mother-in-law accuses her of adultery, and mother and children are set adrift and then separated, though she and the boy Octavian are reunited. The romance follows the adventures of Florent, who is adopted by a Parisian butcher named Clement. The boy demonstrates his propensity for the accoutrements of nobility, frustrating his stepfather's plans to settle him in a trade, but, when he defeats the Saracen giant who has been attacking Paris, Florent becomes a local hero and is welcomed at court. He also inspires the love of the Sultan's daughter. The emperor comes to aid the

French king and meets Florent, but all are soon imprisoned by the Sultan. Young Octavian comes with his mother to free his father and the family is reunited.

All our romances open with situations that show lineage under threat: either a family whose only heir is a daughter, or a married couple who have no heir. The romances beginning with the lack of an appropriate spouse for an heiress open on an incomplete nuclear family—a father and a daughter—often where the mother has died in childbirth. In these circumstances, incest causes the separation of generations. Only in *Emaré*, where the widowed father receives a papal dispensation to marry his daughter, is the threat of incest actual. In *Degaré*, the widowed king loves his daughter inordinately and defeats all who come to woo her. Apparently his possessiveness has raised suspicions since the princess gives up her son because she fears that if his birth is known people will say he is her father's child. In *Eglamour* there are no references to incest or the mother's death; however, no mother is present, and the father seems determined to kill the suitor—for the tests he proposes for *Eglamour*, each of increasing difficulty, seem designed to insure that he does not survive them. In *Torrent* the father is explicit about his plans for the suitor's death, but here the incest motif is muted by the presence of the mother and the father's insistence on marrying his daughter to someone of higher status. In all these romances, fathers appear to be trying to preserve the patrimony through their rights to the disposal of marriageable women, whether by uniting with their daughters or, more commonly, by preventing others from uniting with them.

When the romance concerns a married couple, threats to the lineage may take the double form of infertility and infidelity. Though infertility is often a problem in the *marchen* and traditional tales of separated families, infidelity is not; however, female fidelity is a major concern for patrilinear families and patriarchal societies, and in the Middle English romances the wife is frequently wrongfully accused of adultery. At the beginning of the northern version of *Octavian*, the royal couple has been childless for seven years. Seeking divine assistance, they endow an abbey "That we togedur may haue an heyre, / Thys londe to welde at wylle" (Cambridge MS Ff 2.38. 80-81). When Florence's sons are born, her mother-in-law says they were fathered by the cook's knave and as proof has him brought to the empress's bed where he is discovered and beheaded.¹⁶ Later, the empress's own father

unknowingly condemns her and the boys to be burnt, though her husband takes pity and sets them adrift in a boat. Elizabeth Archibald notes the irony of the situation: at the moment of her greatest marital success—giving birth to a son—the woman loses husband, home, and sometimes her child (160). A more disturbingly patriarchal irony is the fact that this loss is often engineered by another woman. In the romances, the birth of a male heir makes possible the continuation of the lineage, but simultaneously creates such anxiety about the mother that the legitimacy of the new generation is called into question. As the Emperor Octavian's mother says, "... Rome schall wrong heyred be / In vnkynde honde" (Cambridge MS.107-09).¹⁷ Infidelity and infertility are not at issue in *Emaré*; there the king's mother objects to her son's marriage on the grounds that Emaré is a fiend.¹⁸ In both *Emaré* and *Octavian*, the senior generation of the linear family does not recognize the nuclear family as the true family.

As blocking fathers are to unmarried women, so cruel mothers-in-law are to married ones. As in the incestuous father scenario, the problem seems related to a family imbalance—the husband's absence and his widowed mother's presence. (Interestingly, there are no mother-daughter or father-son incomplete families in the romances.) Since the mother-in-law's motives are seldom made explicit, her actions appear to be manifestations of jealousy, or even incestuous desire as Carolyn Dinshaw has argued (105).

A parent's incestuous desires may disrupt the nuclear family and threaten to turn lineage back on itself in a futile bid for the status quo, but these anxieties are often displaced to a social context, where the threat to lineage presents itself as the prospect of marriage to, and thus offspring of, someone of inferior rank. This is the crux of *Eglamour*. The hero is "a knight of lytyll lond," whose suit, his squire tells him, is unlikely to be successful:

Ther woves here emperour and kynge
And dukes that ar bolde
Erles, barouns and knyghtis also,
.....
Sche wold never a kyng forsakee
And a sympull knyght take,
Butt yf your lufe were olde.
.....

Wyste her fadyr of sych a thing
Full dere hytt scholde be sold. (74-84)

But Cristabelle does accept Eglamour's suit because of his exemplary character and service, and the fact that he comes of gentle blood. Following a similar impulse, the King of Portugal seeks a son-in-law of higher status than Torrent and marries Desonell to the Prince of Aragon after promising her to Torrent.¹⁹ He responds to his wife's and daughter's objections: " 'Madame, were that feyer / To make an erlles son myn eyer?' " (786-87) and goes on to say that Torrent would do well to bed a simple knight's daughter; if Desonell marries him, " 'All that ther of here tell / Ther of wyll speke schame.' " (796-97). Inferior status comes into play in various ways in the calumniated queen tales as well. Florence is accused not just of infidelity, but of sleeping with the cook's helper, the lowest of the low.²⁰ Emaré, who has never revealed her parentage and has changed her name to Egaré, or the lost one, attributes what she believes to be her husband's orders to set her adrift to the fact that "he weddede so porely / On me a sympull lady, / He ys ashamed sore" (631-34), though she goes on to assert that he will never get a child of more gentle blood than Segremore.²¹

The real threat to lineage in *Degaré*, *Eglamour*, and *Torrent* is the child born out of wedlock—the nuclear family rejected by the linear family and unsanctioned by society. Degaré is conceived in rape, but Torrent and Desonell as well as Cristabelle and Eglamour are betrothed when the woman gives birth to a son in her fiancé's absence. In fact, they would be married if the fathers did not keep postponing the nuptials with further tests for the suitors.²² The romances express no negative attitudes toward these children, or towards their parents. Except in *Degaré*, the unions are based on companionate, not arranged, marriage and the women play an active role in their courtships. In that it presents a challenge to the authority of patriarchy, companionate marriage is itself a threat to lineage. This threat is made explicit by the technically illegitimate births, though, in keeping with the romances' tendency to have it both ways, companionate marriage is validated by the grandparents' culpability and the parents' constancy, which ultimately assures the legitimacy of the lineage.

Whatever the romances' initial situation, a female is at the root of the threat to lineage, and the result is the same. The senior generation ordains the separation of the family, driving out mother and children so

that the nuclear family is fragmented and displaced. At first the outcasts are at the mercy of natural forces: a stormy sea, a forest, or a wilderness where they are threatened with starvation. The children are often carried away by wild animals, but all eventually find surrogate nuclear families where they are nurtured and successfully mature. Even the animals may be nurturing—a widely recognized traditional motif which underscores the natural basis of the nuclear family. The twin Octavian is suckled by a lioness that recognizes his nobility, raises him with her own offspring, accompanies him when he is reunited with his mother, and fights his enemies in the culminating battle, thus paving the way for the reunion of the family. The animals become like totems, symbolic of identity and power. In *Torrent*, where little attention is devoted to the beasts, the children's human foster parents reference their offspring's animal nurture in their names—Leobertus and Anthony FitzGriffon. Degrebelle displays a griffon on his shield in commemoration of the animal that carried him away.

Animal families are succeeded by adoptive human ones, sometimes of lowly status.²³ *Degaré*, *Emaré*, and *Octavian* give special emphasis to the education and upbringing of the younger generation. *Degaré* is not carried off by animals, but abandoned at a forest hermitage with money, tokens of recognition, and a letter instructing him to seek his parents. The hermit christens the infant and gives him the name *Degaré* because, the narrator explains, he is “degarre”—a thing unknown, or nearly lost.²⁴ The boy is raised by the hermit's sister, the wife of a wealthy merchant, until he is old enough for religious training; then he remains with the hermit until his majority when he receives the tokens and the letter and sets out to find his family. Though the episode is briefly related, it carefully incorporates both the female-centered phase of nurture and the later phase of education, which is followed by the youth's period of chivalric proving. Segremore is never separated from *Emaré*, who remains the focus of the narrative, but nurture and adoptive families still play an important part in the romance. After their ordeal at sea, mother and child are taken in by a Roman burgess and nursed back to health by his wife. In this functional family, *Emaré* supports herself by fine needlework and teaches her son the ways of courtesy that are his birthright. In fact, the nurture of children forms a part of each episode in this brief romance. After her mother's death, *Emaré*'s upbringing by the lady Abro is described. When the heroine washes ashore in Galys, she is rescued by

Sir Kaydor and serves as governess to his children before marrying the king. Her instruction of Segremore is thus the third time this theme has been introduced. *Octavian* includes the most extended treatment of child-raising as the *enfance* of the second twin, Florent, becomes the focus of the narrative while the story of the biological parents recedes. The infant is carried off by animals and rescued by outlaws before he is purchased by Clement. Florent is well cared for: Clement hires a nurse and takes him home in a basket; here the butcher's wife receives the boy with kisses, declaring "he shall be myn own childe" (Cambridge MS. 611). He is raised with the couple's biological son, but the wife, recognizing Florent's innate nobility, protects him from Clement's anger when the boy fails to succeed in various trades. As Florent's natural chivalric inclinations manifest themselves, Clement even outfits him in rustic armor to fight the Saracen giant.

Sometimes orphans and exiled wives find their way into noble families. Florence and her son Octavian, Cristabelle and Degrebelle, and Desonell and her sons are all rescued by kings. In these cases little notice is given to the displaced heirs' upbringing; the families of lower status receive the most attention. However, even when the narrative devotes little time to the adoptive family, some reference to nurture seems obligatory. As Arlyn Diamond has demonstrated in her analysis of the many relationships of support and affiliation in *William of Palerne*, the nurture of abandoned children is an important theme in romance.

What is remarkable here is that these surrogate nuclear families are the truly functional families of romance. Women play an important role in the adoptive families, caring for infants, teaching manners, and protecting the young. The nurturing role of the nuclear family is carried out only in the absence of the linear family. The replacement of the birth family distant from it both socially and geographically provides an escape from the pressures of lineage while the younger generation matures and achieves its true nature. Once this is accomplished, the youth is able to discover his identity and reconstitute both his nuclear family and his lineage with patrimony intact, or even augmented.

The process of recognition and reunion is dangerous, though; having been disrupted by threats of incest and murder, it seems the families can only be restored through further violence. When exiled mothers are separated from their sons, the sons are likely to appear as

claimants for their mothers' hands. Sons raised apart from their fathers often do battle with them before recognitions take place. In *Degaré*, which began with the father's quasi-incestuous and violent assertion of control over his daughter, followed by the fairy knight's violent physical possession of the maiden, the individuals and the kin group only achieve a happy resolution through more violence, as James Simons observes: "Degaré must nearly kill his grandfather, must nearly sleep with his mother, and must nearly kill his father before proper relationships can be established between and within generations" (129). In fact, the mother seems to repeat the incestuous pattern of her father, for among the tokens she leaves with her son are a pair of gloves which fit only her and instructions that the child is to love only her whom the gloves fit. When Degaré wins the hand of his mother in the tournament, the narrator intrudes to comment on the dangers of making marriages without ascertaining the family backgrounds of the spouses, and the lady herself is unhappy at the prospect of marriage to someone she knows nothing about.²⁵ But before they go to bed, Degaré thinks to give her the gloves and so discovers who she is, and who he is. She then provides him with a further token, a broken sword left by his father. Degaré sets out again and is soon challenged by a knight who recognizes the sword and supplies the missing piece. Following the father-son recognition, the parents are married with the grandfather's blessing while Degaré marries the lady he had earlier defended.

Here the treatment of the nuclear family accords well with psychological theories of family romance. Brewer explains that only when the child recognizes his mother for what she is and understands that he is her child can he find an appropriate mate. But his union with this woman cannot be complete until he recognizes his true relationship to his father. Only when his father is no longer his opponent can the son become sexually complete (the phallic sword is made whole) (70). Archibald's interpretation is similar if less focused exclusively on sexual maturation: "The symbolism of the broken sword tip is striking: the unifying of the sword pieces can be seen as symbolizing not only Degaré's establishment of his identity and reputation, and his sexual maturity, but also the unifying of his family which is necessary to legitimize the erstwhile foundling" (130). Now he is ready to marry and put the patriarchal sword to proper use. Of all the children in these romances, Degaré takes the most initiative in reestablishing his family.

In *Eglamour* and *Torrent* the psychological family romance is less intense, and the mothers, not the sons, are responsible for the recognition and reunion of the family. Degrebelle is not on a search for his parents when he wins the hand of his mother in a tournament, he does not fight his uncle (his mother's guardian), and the devices of recognition are not sexually symbolic, but rather heraldic depictions of the circumstances of the family's separation. Christabelle, inquiring about the griffon design on her groom's shield, recognizes him before their union is consummated and their marriage is annulled. Degrebelle does fight his father, who defeats him, but there is no recognition until Christabelle identifies Eglamour from his shield. In contrast to Degaré, Degrebelle does not win his own wife, but rather he marries a princess who had formerly been offered to his father. After a double wedding, the romance concludes with Eglamour assuming the throne of Artois and Degrebelle inheriting the throne of Israel from his foster father, thus heading off a potential generational conflict for control of the patrimony.

The Oedipal elements in *Torrent's* reunion are less developed than in *Eglamour's*, as the initiating motif of father-daughter incest was also undeveloped. The sons never become their mother's champions and play only secondary roles in the reunion of their parents. Torrent, having been defeated in battle, is imprisoned by his son Leobertus; later, when he is released, he establishes his primacy by teaching the young man to joust. When Desonell's guardian declares a tournament for her (whether for her hand or in her honor isn't specified), Torrent and his two sons engage each other and the father is victorious, though all three are judged champions. Desonell then reveals herself to Torrent whom she has apparently recognized from his shield and reports of his combats. Their sons are recognized when Desonell recounts the loss of her children to Torrent and the boys' foster fathers recall the circumstances of their foundlings. All return to Portugal where the couple is married and Torrent claims Desonell's patrimony while designating his sons to be heirs of their childless adoptive fathers. Again, potential for generational conflict is avoided and succession is assured.

The reunions of *Octavian* and *Emaré* do not involve threatened marriage to the mother or combat with the father. The circumstances of the reunions are similar in both: the son is present at a banquet with his father who is impressed by the young man's superior manners—a motif

that relates the reunion to the episodes of nurture preceding it. Thinking mournfully on the son he has lost, the father asks to adopt the boy. In the northern *Octavian*, the Emperor himself declares that the youth must be his son and, after hearing how Clement came to adopt him, adds the patronymic designation "of Rome" to Florent's name.²⁶ The reunion with the rest of the family is accomplished later by his twin. Young Octavian, who knows his father's identity, comes to his aid with mother and the lioness in tow. After freeing the emperor and Florent from prison, Octavian tells his story and asks the emperor to make peace with his mother, who then recognizes Florent as her other son. The romance concludes with Florent's marriage to the converted Saracen princess, and they all return to Rome. In *Emaré* it is the mother herself who initiates the family reunion. When a banquet is held for the King of Galys who has come to Rome, she sends Segremore to wait upon his father at table and subsequently directs him to bring her husband to her. She initiates a similar process to bring about a reunion with her father at his entry into the city. Both husband and father have come to Rome repenting their treatment of Emaré, thus bringing them into the physical, emotional, and spiritual place where the heroine, who is the only one who knows who everybody is, can orchestrate the reunion.²⁷ In its female-centeredness and emphasis on the Christian virtues of patience and penance, *Emaré* offers an alternative to the martial resolutions of the other romances. Lineage is reconstituted without recourse to family conflict. Since Segramore is only seven years old at the end of the story and has never been separated from his mother, there is no opportunity for marriage to her and combat with his father. The nuclear family is reunited without recourse to combat only when the son is legitimate and remains with the mother, perhaps because an essential component of the family remains intact and the son's loss of identity is less complete.

The reunion of the nuclear family makes possible the restoration of the lineage, and the marriages of the younger generation guarantee the succession of the patrimony. However, the reintegration of the senior generation differs from romance to romance. The cruel mothers-in-law are excluded from the family and punished. Emperor Octavian has his mother tried, though she takes her own life rather than face her sentence of burning. When the king of Galys returns home to find Emaré exiled, he too decrees that his mother should be burnt, but, in keeping with the milder tone of that romance, his counselors persuade

him to send her into exile.²⁸ Some of the blocking fathers fare no better. Torrent puts the king of Portugal to sea in a leaky boat after discovering that the king has had his betrothed set adrift. The king's perfidy is so great that even his wife does not object to this punishment. Torrent claims the lands the king had promised him and entrusts them to the queen while he searches for Desonell; thus her mother is present at the marriage of the reunited couple. *Torrent* is the only one of our romances to conclude with a surviving woman in the senior generation of the linear family, and she has been a sympathetic, supportive figure throughout. Eglamour is less directly responsible for dispatching his lady's father. When the knight finds Christabelle has been exiled, he drives the earl into a tower from which he falls to his death when the family returns at the end of the romance. The incestuous fathers of *Degaré* and *Emaré* live to be reunited with their children and see their grandchildren achieve fitting status. Emaré's earns his reunion by doing penance for his wrongs. Though Degaré's grandfather is overly possessive and his way of finding a suitable husband for his daughter leaves much to be desired, he has never threatened her; she alone of our heroines is not separated from her parent. The king's acceptance of defeat at the hands of his grandson earns him a place in the reunited family. Like *Eglamour*, this romance concludes with a double marriage, here assuring the possibility of a fourth generation.

As can be seen from both the range of variations and the persistent recurrence of certain patterns in these romances, it is evident that the narrative formulas of the Middle English romances are both durable and adaptable. Plots involving calumniated queens, separated families, and male Cinderellas could be developed with different emphases: the trials of faithful lovers, the adventures of their offspring, spiritual testing, chivalric education, patient endurance, or knightly combats. The formulaic elements could be organized in various combinations to achieve these different emphases; particular episodes could be treated in greater or lesser detail, or omitted entirely, or repeated again and again. In spite of this surface variety, the very redundancy of the corpus, and the repetition of similar episodes within the romances themselves, suggest that they addressed issues of fundamental significance to their audiences.

The proliferation of family romances and the development of plot variants incorporating three generations point to concerns about the generational roles and family relationships constructed by the lineage

and the nuclear family. A deep ambivalence toward women pervades these stories, revealing anxieties about the preservation of patriarchal authority and patrilinear family structures—whether the danger appears as a mother's usurpation of a son's authority over his wife, a daughter's challenge to her father's authority over her marriage, or a wife's threat to lineage through infidelity, or otherwise illegitimate offspring. The ambivalence is so great that areas of traditionally female purview like the raising of children are distanced from the patriarchal family. They are necessary to insure the lineage, but are best taken care of elsewhere. Yet the stories also call into question extremes of patriarchal authority, especially when fathers refuse to allow their daughters (and mutual love) any role in the selection of a spouse and are unable to recognize that young men of noble character but lesser status may be suitable to carry on the lineage.

The couple itself and the nuclear family it gives rise to are likewise treated with ambivalence; though the union is validated by the romances' conclusions, the stories are all about separation. Separation is the punishment for challenges to authority, but it also allows the faithful to prove their love and validate their challenge. Particularly for the male characters, whether fathers or sons, separation seems to be necessary for the chivalric testing that establishes their entitlement to the lineage and its patrimony.

The formulaic plots of the romances present two main patterns for reconciling the nuclear family and the linear family, depending upon whether the lineage passes through the male or the female line. In the former case, a married couple where the husband's rank is primary produces legitimate heirs but this nuclear family is separated by the husband's treacherous mother; when the family is reunited and the mother eliminated, the lineage continues in the male line and the narrative validates the younger (third) generation's claim to inherited wealth and status. In romances of the second pattern, a courting couple where the woman's rank is primary has illegitimate children and the nuclear family is separated by the woman's duplicitous father; when the couple is married and the father eliminated, the lineage continues through the female line and the narrative validates the untitled male's (second generation's) suitability to claim her status and patrimony. In both patterns the nuclear family is subordinated to the lineage, its existence being affirmed only when the lineage is assured. This assurance is perhaps needed because the nuclear family's existence is shown to

depend, in some way, on the elimination (or, as in *Degaré*, the subordination) of the senior generation of the lineage. The plots do not resolve the conflicting imperatives of the two family structures; rather, the narratives present the imperatives in simplified terms that allow their oppositions to be revealed and balanced. The tension necessary to maintain this balance provides the dynamic energy of the narratives. When the three-generation family romances are read together, the various combinations and differing emphases given to their standard repertoire of episodes offer more complex responses to issues than these narratives are sometimes given credit for.

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Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented in the MAM session on Dysfunctional Families at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2002.

² Lee Ramsey devotes a chapter of his book *Chivalric Romances* to romances concerning family affairs. See also Derek Brewer, Stephen Knight, and Felicity Riddy.

³ These are the terms used by the historians and literary scholars I have consulted, and further explanations follow in my paper. I recognize that they may not be the terms favored by social scientists.

⁴ In the following discussion, all citations are to the following editions of these romances: E. Adam, ed., *Torrent of Portyngale*, EETS: ES 51 (London: Trubner, 1887); W. H. French and C. B. Hale, eds., "Chevalere Assigne," *Middle English Metrical Romances* (New York: Prentice, 1930), 857-75; Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., "Degaré," *The Middle English Breton Lays*, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan U., 1995), 89-144; Frances Richardson, ed., *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, EETS: OS 256 (London: Oxford, 1986); Edith Rickert, ed., *The Romance of Emaré*, EETS: ES 99 (London: Kegan Paul, 1906); Frances McSparran, ed., *Octovian*, EETS: OS 289 (London: Oxford UP, 1986) [the conventional spelling for this work is *Octavian*].

⁵ See David Herlihy's *Medieval Households* (132) for numerous examples of subordination of nuclear families to dynastic practices.

⁶ Felicity Riddy, citing the work of J. Hajnal and R. M. Smith, finds evidence of companionate marriage in the Middle Ages (241, 250). I have some reservations about the extent to which the actions of characters in the romances correlate with actual contemporary practices. As wish-fulfillment fantasies the romances may have spoken to their audiences' desires, but the stories' depictions of companionate

marriage are also derived from the literary traditions of courtly love, which generally concerns itself with attachments outside of marriage. This elite convention would have given an appealing aristocratic coloring to a way of choosing a marriage partner more apt to be practiced by those further down the social hierarchy. See my "Class, Family, and Gender in Popular Romances" for a discussion of the Middle English romances and changing marriage practices. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw the continuation of the marriage debate begun with the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century, when the secular, endogamous marriage customs favored by the aristocracy clashed with the exogamous marriage practices promoted by the church. Nancy Black, in *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens*, points out that spousal choice and definitions of incest were important issues in the debate, and of particular relevance to stories of calumniated queens (45).

⁷ The Paston letters provide several instances of family conflicts over arranged and companionate marriages. One daughter secretly married the family's steward and was ostracized when she refused to leave him. Another was severely punished for rejecting a suitor favored by her parents, but she held out and in the end made a more agreeable match (Davis 498-500, 541-43).

⁸ See Georges Duby's "Youth in Aristocratic Society" for discussion of romance as a response to aristocratic social pressures (120).

⁹ See Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (158); Derek Brewer, *Symbolic Stories* (8); and also Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (185).

¹⁰ Elizabeth Archibald notes in *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* that the period of the rise of romance was also a period of great anxiety among clerics about the definition of marriage, consanguinity laws, and incest taboos (149). In "Gold in the Dungeon: Incest Stories and Family Values in the Middle Ages," she attributes the frequent employment of the incest motif in medieval narratives (exempla and saint's lives as well as romances) to their clerical authors

who would have disparaged marriage and family life in order to promote spirituality and ecclesiastical vocations (4).

¹¹ Literature is not an entirely accurate reflection of practice, though, as boys of noble birth are more likely to be abandoned in romance than in real life (Boswell 390).

¹² Children were often sent to members of the extended family, particularly maternal uncles, since this allowed the male members of the mother's family to maintain influence over rising generations. David Herlihy notes that in medieval Florence the wealthiest households were raising nearly half the children in the city (153).

¹³ The names of owners and their family members are sometimes recorded in the volumes. Well known examples include the Thornton manuscripts (Lincoln Cathedral Library 91 and British Library Additional 31042) for the most part written by Robert Thornton, a Yorkshire knight, and passed down through succeeding generations of his family. Numerous items in the Findern manuscript (Cambridge U.L. Ff.1.6) were written by members of that family and their social circle.

¹⁴ R. M. Lumiansky points to *Chevalier Assigne's* "simple religious theme," lengthy passages of elementary instruction in arms, and the hero's age of twelve as evidence that the poem may have been intended for the education of young boys (103). This romance encompasses three generations and has much the same formulaic plot as the romances discussed in this paper. However, at the conclusion little attention is paid to the reunion of the family, in spite of the fact that the story is usually presented as an ancestral romance establishing the lineage of Godfrey of Bouillon. All attention is focused on the pious aspects of the legend.

¹⁵ *Eglamour*, *Octavian*, and *Degaré* appear in the second part of Cambridge University Library MS. Ff.2.38, the first part of which is devoted to didactic materials such as instructional works and saints' lives. Six other romances are included, among them *The Earl of Toulous*, *Sir Triamour*, and *Le Bone Florence of Rome* which have plot elements in common with the three-generation family romances. The Lincoln Thornton manuscript (Lincoln Cathedral MS. 91) contains

Octavian and *Eglamour*, as well as seven more romances including *Sir Isumbras* (a pious tale of a separated family) and *The Earl of Toulous*. These are grouped together at the beginning of the volume, followed by religious and devotional works, many by Richard Rolle. *Eglamour*, *Octavian* and the only surviving text of *Emaré* appear in British Library MS. Cotton Caligula A.2. The first two narratives are grouped with other secular romances while *Emaré* is grouped with religious items and pious romances including *Sir Isumbras*. *Torrent* makes its only appearance in Chetham Library MS. 8009, along with a couple of other romances, several saints' lives, and a book of carving and nurture. All of these volumes date from the fifteenth century. *Degaré* is in the Auchinleck MS (National Library of Scotland MS. Advocates 19.2.1), that famous early fourteenth-century collection of romances and saints' lives. Later in that century, *Degaré* and *Eglamour* were copied in British Library MS. Egerton 2862, a small volume of seven romances. The sixteenth-century manuscript Bodleian Library Douce 261 contains *Degaré* and *Eglamour* as well as *Sir Isumbras* and *the Jest of Sir Gawain* (all based on printed texts). *Eglamour* and *Degaré* also appear in the seventeenth-century Percy Folio Manuscript, alongside numerous other romances and ballads.

¹⁶ The folk belief that twins must be the offspring of two fathers lies behind the mother-in-law's false accusation. In the Southern version of *Octavian* (BL MS. Cotton Caligula A.2) this accusation is explicit. In *Chevalere Assigne* the queen gives birth to six children because she remarks of a woman with twins that she must have had two lovers.

¹⁷ A similar episode occurs in *Sir Triamour* which opens with a childless royal couple. The king pledges to go on crusade "That God almyghty schulde helpe them so / A chylde to gete betwene them two / That ther heyre myght bee" (l. 34-36). Unknown to him, before he departs, the queen conceives a son. The steward whom he leaves in charge makes advances to her but she refuses them; when the king returns the steward tells him the child was fathered by another and urges that the queen be exiled. Here the threat does not come from a member of the family, though, as a member of the household the steward is part of an extended family. *Chevalere Assigne* also begins with a childless couple and a common concern. The king "... all in

languor he laye for lofe of here one / That he hadde no chylde to cheuene his londis/ But to be lordles of his when he that lyf lafte" (l. 14-16). When the queen gives birth to sextuplets, her diabolical mother-in-law substitutes puppies for the children, accuses her of having relations with animals, and imprisons her, while sending the children to be killed.

¹⁸ The mother-in-law is responding to the unearthly beauty of Emaré's robe which was made by the daughter of an emir (a heathen). Those who see Emaré in the robe think her "no earthly thing" and her father's incestuous desires may be attributed to the effects of the robe. The accusation that Emaré is a fiend may also be reflected in the mother-in-law's message to her son that his wife has given birth to dogs. Abnormal births were associated with non-Christian parentage, as in *The King of Tars* where the offspring of a Moslem and a Christian is a formless lump until it is christened.

¹⁹ Torrent must first slay a giant. Eglamour, too, dispatches a number of giants, and it is tempting to see these as manifestations of the blocking fathers, as in tales of the giant's daughter (for example, *Culhwch and Olwen*).

²⁰ Romances conventionally use kitchen work as an indicator of low status. In *Havelok the Dane* and Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth*, both male Cinderella stories, the heroes take employment as cooks' assistants before their noble status is revealed.

²¹ No explanation is given for why Emaré keeps her identity a secret. Sir Kaydor, knows only that she is an earl's daughter from a far land (l. 422). Christabelle and Desonell both make theirs known and are taken in by relatives. Florence, too, asserts her royal status in exile. But humility and patient suffering are more important in *Emaré* than in the other narratives, and these qualities are more readily achieved with loss of status and worldly identity

²² It could even be argued that the couples are married, since according to church canon a couple's exchange of *verba de presenti* (words in the present tense, to the effect that they are husband and wife) could constitute a binding union even without formal exchange of

vows and ecclesiastical solemnization. By the period in which the romances were composed, the church's growing control over marriage customs made this practice problematic.

²³ Many noble characters of romance are humbly fostered. The abandoned children of *Chevalere Assigne* are suckled by a God-sent hind and raised by a hermit in the woods. Much attention is devoted to the hero's instruction in arms by an angel who comes to tell him he is destined to save his mother. Bevis of Hampton's twin sons are fostered by a fisherman and a forester. *Havelok the Dane* recounts in great detail its hero's youth in the family of Grim the fisherman. William of Palerne, who is dispossessed by his uncle, is rescued by a werewolf and raised in a forest until he is taken in by a family of shepherds who raise him with their own children. In all cases the humble circumstances serve to highlight the characters' innate nobility.

²⁴ Obviously the name Degaré is related to Egaré, the name Emaré chooses for herself in exile.

²⁵ The king seems to care little about the appropriateness of the match, vowing to give his daughter and his lands to anyone who can overcome him, even if he is a burghess or a churl (l. 479-82).

²⁶ The Southern version of *Octavian* and the English romances' Old French source delay the recognition until the end when the reunion with the rest of the family takes place. The relocation of the recognition in the Northern version results in some inconsistencies in the final reunion scene.

²⁷ The King of Galys bears no direct responsibility for his wife's exile, but his penance makes his reunion more parallel with that of her father.

²⁸ Being dispossessed of her entitlements and set adrift is perhaps a more fitting punishment for the mother-in-law than burning, since it parallels that which she inflicted on Emaré. Once her treachery is revealed, the cruel mother-in-law of *Chevalere Assigne* is burned in the fire that she intended for the execution of her daughter-in-law.

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